

We were branded like cattle, only they fed the cattle better.

Max Bloomberg's journal

CHAPTER TWO

Dr. Bruce Starkman was watching a mix of rain and sleet out the window of their suite at the Grand Geneva Resort in southern Wisconsin when he became aware of Sari standing nearby, smelling of Opium perfume and cigarettes. He turned slowly.

Standing before him in a form-fitting teddy was perhaps the sexiest social worker at Cook County Hospital—tall, trim, athletic, and with great legs. Short blonde hair framed a perfectly made-up oval face. The only faults Bruce could find with her were her smoking and a tendency to be outrageously flirtatious.

“So,” she said. “We can’t go out and play. What do you want to do instead?”

He smiled. Flirtatious could be good. Strangely, what had first caught his attention about Sari wasn’t her looks, but the efficient method she had of problem solving. She seemed able to get patients evaluated and given necessary advice or transferred appropriately before others even had a handle on the situation. It was a very handy skill on the wards as well as in the emergency room.

Aside from medicine and sex, however, their only other shared interest

happened to be tennis. During the previous days at the resort—his first vacation in more than a year from his all-consuming job of chief ER resident at Chicago’s Cook County Hospital—Bruce awoke before her each morning to work out at the health club. Then, after breakfast, the couple played singles for two hours at a nearby indoor tennis court. Sari was damned good, and many of her serves and ground strokes zipped by him. Actually, this little trip was intended to give their fading relationship a shot in the arm—or, perhaps, in the genitals. In either case, the plan didn’t seem to be working.

But he was willing to give it one more try.

Before he could respond to her demand for his attention, the telephone rang.

“Hold that thought,” he said, then walked to the bedside table and picked up the call.

“Doctor Starkman,” a tired voice said, “this is Alan Goldstein, your Uncle Max’s attorney.”

What in the world...? “Yes. What’s wrong? My uncle okay?”

“I’m sorry to tell you, he passed away a few days ago.”

Bruce’s legs tingled and almost gave way. He grabbed on to the bed for support. “What? No. You sure?”

“Positive. No question.”

“But, but I’m—I was—his nearest relative. Why didn’t someone tell me before?”

“Doctor, I’m sorry, but I just got a call about it late yesterday afternoon, and it took my staff quite a while to track you down.”

As an ER doctor, dealing with death was an omnipresent part of his profession, but Bruce found that his training didn’t help him now. The blood seemed to drain from his head, and he almost dropped the phone. “My God. What happened?”